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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000951

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH OF INDIGENOUS LEADER MAKES HEADWAY

REF: A. DHAKA 484

1B. DHAKA 663
1C. DHAKA 684

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia A. Butenis, reason para 1.4(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The retired judge appointed by the government to investigate the death of Garo activist Choilesh Ritchil in Madhupur on March 18 has had Ritchil's body exhumed for autopsy. Meanwhile, the recent wave of anti-corruption arrests in Dhaka has netted the Chief Conservator of Forests, one of the Garos' main protagonists. END SUMMARY.

CHOILESH'S BODY EXHUMED

12. (C) Retired Judge Rofi Uddin Ahmed ordered the exhumation of the body of Garo activist Choilesh Ritchil on June 10. Ritchil was allegedly killed by army soldiers in Madhupur on March 18. In mid-May, Chief Caretaker Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed appointed Judge Ahmed to investigate Ritchil's death. Ritchil's body was exhumed in the presence of his family, local government officials and police and taken to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital for autopsy.

13. (C) Ritchil's body had been returned to his family on March 19. Despite efforts by police to prevent people from photographing the body before the funeral, numerous clandestine shots have circulated showing clear signs of torture. This corroborated the account of Ritchil's death told by Pratap Sangma, a relative held with Ritchil who survived his own beating. Police told the Ambassador during a visit to Madhupur on April 18 that the post-mortem report on Ritchil was "missing," and without it they could not start an investigation. The new autopsy was greeted by Garo activists as a sign the logjam on investigating Ritchil's death may finally be breaking.

CASE HAS LINKS TO CONFLICT WITH FORESTRY OFFICIALS

14. (C) According to Father Eugene Homrich, an American priest who has headed the Jalchhatra mission in Madhupur for over forty years, Ritchil's death was directly related to corruption in the Forestry Department which oversees the Madhupur Forest region where most Garos reside. Local Forestry Department officials have been illegally logging the forest for years, leading to mass deforestation. To cover up the logging, the local officials blamed the Garo population and the Jalchhatra mission, filing more than 8,000 charges. "They filed charges against everyone, even an 18-month old baby," Homrich told us. Catholic missionaries working with indigenous peoples in other parts of the country, such as the

northeast, have had similar charges filed against them and run the risk of arrest.

¶15. (C) The former head of the local army camp, Major Toufiq Elahi, was allegedly a classmate of the local head of the Forestry Department, Jahurul Huq. Homrich and Garo activists told us they were informed by local government officials Huq convinced Major Elahi, who had taken over certain law-and-order functions during the state of emergency, to get involved in the case and eliminate Ritchil, who was an outspoken advocate against the department and for Garo rights. The human rights organization Odhikar, which conducted an independent investigation of Ritchil's death, confirmed the link between Elahi and the head of the Forestry Department, and cited numerous witnesses who linked Ritchil's death to this issue.

ANTI-CORRUPTION DRIVE NETS FORESTRY HEAD

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¶16. (C) Meanwhile, on May 28 Chief Conservator of Forests Osman Gani was arrested at his home in Dhaka. Press reported that over ten million taka (almost \$150,000) was found hidden throughout his house, including stuffed inside pillows and tucked into a rice drum in the kitchen. Joint law enforcement forces later recovered another 30 million taka (\$450,000). Joint forces are also reportedly investigating other Forestry Department officials as well for misappropriation of funds. Father Homrich, who had met Gani just two weeks before his arrest, welcomed the news and was hopeful it would lead to improvement of the tense situation in the area.

¶17. (SBU) Post has raised this issue repeatedly with the government, as have other diplomatic missions, and we continue to monitor the situation closely.

DHAKA 00000951 002 OF 002

COMMENT: WELCOME FIRST STEPS

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¶18. (C) The exhumation is the first tangible evidence that the government is taking Ritchil's death seriously. The case has focused an international spotlight on the situation in Bangladesh and the appointment of an investigator with some teeth is a welcomed step. In addition, after years of conflict with local officials, the indigenous communities -- most of which depend on forests for their livelihood -- stand to benefit if the Forestry Department can be cleaned up as part of the government's anti-corruption drive. However, the real test of the government's commitment to justice in the Ritchil case will be if they file charges against the perpetrators of his torture and murder.

BUTENIS